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The Commercialization of Sociological Research: On the How and Why (Not)

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Mini biography

Kathrin Komp is an assistant professor in sociology at Helsinki University, Finland. She specialized in research on population ageing, life-courses, welfare policies, forecasting, and research methods. Recent publications include an article entitled “Shifts in the realized retirement age: Europe in times of pension reform and economic crisis” (forthcoming in the Journal of European Social Policy) and a co-authored article entitled “Population ageing in a lifecourse perspective: developing a conceptual framework” (published 2016 in Ageing and Society). Komp is on the executive committee of the European Sociological Association.

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Abstract

Recent budget cuts in academia and the spread of neoliberal thought has put pressure on sociology. Unlocking new funding sources is a major concern for sociologists and focusing on funding from the market is a prominent suggestion. Such funding can be generated through research commercialization, that is, developing research findings into products and services that can be sold on the market. This study explores how a commercialization of sociological research can be achieved, and what advantages and disadvantages it has.

Methods are expert interviews and participant observation. Findings show that a commercialization of sociological research can be achieved through studies on companies or products, and through the participation in multidisciplinary research projects. The proponents of commercialization are mainly university administrations, consultants, and economists, who see advantages in the acquisition of funding and the improvement of products. The adversaries of commercialization are sociologists, who find a commercialization antithetical to their disciplinary identity, have ethical concerns about aggravating social problems as a side-effect, and fear for their academic careers. In conclusion, a commercialization of sociological research needs to proceed circumspectly, considering that it could internally erode the discipline of sociology.

Keywords

sociology; research commercialization; funding; university reforms; scientific discipline

Introduction

Sociology is at the crossroads, again. In 1946, T.H. Marshall made this statement to illustrate how the developing discipline of sociology was struggling with decisions on how to position itself (Marshall 1963). Today, more than 70 years later, the discipline of sociology must again decide how to position itself. But while the need for a decision in the 1940s arose from the newness of the discipline, the need today arises from financial restraints.

The discipline of sociology has been deeply affected by recent budget cuts in universities and by changes in research funding. In previous years, governments across Europe have cut university budgets and the cuts have become more drastic since the 2008 crisis (Christopherson et al. 2014; Holmwood 2010; King 2011). Universities handle these cuts through lay-offs and organizational and budgetary restructuring (Burawoy 2011; Christopherson et al. 2014; Richter and Hostettler 2015). As a social science, the discipline of sociology faces additional pressure from outside the university. The European Commission's Horizon 2020 Framework Programme for Research for 2014–2020 budgeted considerably less for the social sciences and humanities than previous Framework Programmes: one percent of the budget for 2007–2013 was earmarked for the social sciences and humanities, whereas only 0.002 percent was earmarked for 2014–2020 (European Commission 2012, 2013, 2015). This change occurred because in Horizon 2020, the European Commission considered the social sciences and humanities as cross-cutting disciplines, which can be included in most research projects and, therefore, do not need specifically designated funding (European Commission 2016). Both changes, within and outside of the university, raise questions about how sociological research can be funded. The answer will affect the orientation and functioning of the discipline of sociology as a whole (Burawoy 2005; Holmwood 2010).

Channeling the current neoliberal spirit, many governments and universities suggest solving the funding shortage through market mechanisms: funding should be allocated to universities and researchers on a more competitive basis after thorough review, students should pay (higher) tuition fees, universities should cooperate with companies, and university research should be turned into commercially viable products (Holmwood 2014; Rasmussen 2008; Richter and Hostettler 2015; Tuunainen and Knuuttila 2009). These suggestions challenge sociological research, requiring sociologists to position themselves. The reason is that, according to Burawoy (2005), sociology concerns itself with civil society and strives to protect society against market influences. Consequently, the neoliberal turn of universities goes against the sociological disciplinary identity and it challenges sociology to break with its previous practices. Sociologists responded to this dilemma by trying to strengthen their disciplinary identity, as the debate triggered by Burawoy's presidential speech at the 2004 meeting of the American Sociological Association illustrates (Aronowitz 2005; Burawoy 2005; Davies 2009; Ghamari-Tabrizi 2005). Moreover, they underlined the contribution that sociology makes to society, as the European Sociological Association's petition to the European Commission for more support of social sciences and humanities exemplifies (European Sociological Association 2015; Leccardi 2013).

Researchers document the ongoing debates about the role and financing of universities and about the positioning of sociology in a rich array of studies (e.g., Calhoun 2005; Esko et al. 2012; Holmwood 2010, 2011, 2014; Marginson 2006; Popp Berman 2015). The tenor of these studies is clear: universities continue to expand market mechanisms, while sociologists continue to reject such mechanisms. The study at hand explores how sociology can deal with market mechanisms, taking the opposite approach to previous research. It takes on the role of the devil's advocate, asking how sociology would change if it embraced market mechanisms. More specifically, it investigates how a commercialization of sociological

research could play out. Commercializing research means developing research findings into products and services, which can be offered on the market (Zhao 2004). As such, research commercialization represents the strongest turn towards the market that sociology could take – and therefore the strongest deviation from the status quo. This study answers three research questions: (1) How can a commercialization of sociological research be achieved? (2) What advantages would a commercialization of sociological research bring? And (3) what disadvantages would a commercialization of sociological research bring? These questions are answered by means of expert interviews, participant observation, and a literature review. The analysis focuses on the situation in Europe, because the European Commission's activities and the flow of information and persons between European countries link universities and discussions in this region. Findings illustrate what is at stake if market mechanisms continue to permeate sociology. They highlight the intended and unintended consequences of this trend, and its winners and losers. Sociologists, university administrations, and policymakers can use the insight gained to adopt better informed positions towards the neoliberal turn in sociology, to assess whether intervention is necessary, and to decide on the most suitable intervention points.

Material and methods

This study uses a mixed methods approach, combining a literature review with expert interviews and participant observations. The literature reviewed are scientific articles and publications of sociological associations, universities, governments, funding agencies, and other actors involved in sociology and research commercialization. The expert interviews and participant observations collected information from 35 individuals: junior and senior researchers in sociology, social psychology, economics, and theology; employees of innovation and commercialization services and of a chamber of commerce; members of the

university administration at the departmental, university, and national level – including department heads, a grant writer, a member of funding support services, a chancellor, a vice-chancellor of research and innovation, and a representative of the German University Rector's Conference; a member of a think tank and (former) consultants to the European Commission, the United Nations, and the World Bank; and representatives of the German Research Foundation, the European Sociological Association, the European Alliance for the Social Sciences and Humanities, and the European Commission's Directorate-General Research and Innovation. Most individuals were active in several countries, with their current countries of principal residence being: Australia, Austria, Belgium, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Ireland, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom.

The data collection took place from March 2015 until November 2016. I collected information from 24 of the individuals in expert interviews, and from 11 individuals through participant observation. The experts interviewed are individuals who are directly concerned with the commercialization of sociological research and who have specialized knowledge on it (Bogner et al. 2009). The expert interviews were conducted face-to-face, via phone and via skype. All interviews had the same structure: initially I asked the interviewees about their personal experiences with the commercialization of sociological research; then I reported findings gained so far and discussed them with the interviewees; finally I asked for suggestions on relevant literature, interview partners and phenomena of interest. The interviews were recorded if the interviewees agreed and it was technically possible. In all other cases I took notes during the interviews. The information collected was analyzed through qualitative content analysis, which is a process of summarizing content and structuring information according to categories found in the text itself (Mayring 2008).

The participant observations offer an impression of how researchers deal with the commercialization of sociological research in their everyday work. These observations required me to partake in situations where researchers are actively engaging with the commercialization of sociological research, so I could observe the conversations that take place, as well as the behaviours, group dynamics, and emotions (Spradley 2016). The participant observations took place during conference sessions, workshops, seminars, meetings, and book presentations. All events dealt with topics related to the commercialization of sociological research. I participated in these events, posed questions during the discussion sections of the events, and documented my observations in notes.

The progression of literature reviews, expert interviews, and participant observations was determined according to the principles of theoretical sampling. Theoretical sampling is a sampling process that evolves while the researcher collects information. It requires researchers to switch back and forth between collecting and analyzing data, with an analysis being carried out every time new information is collected. The analyses are used to update the findings so far and to identify open questions. The next step of data collection is then designed to answer the open questions. The process of data collection stops when no new questions emerge and when the data analysis renders no new information (Glaser and Strauss 2006). Thereby, the process of theoretical sampling ensures the commercialization of sociological research is exhaustively explored. The present study reached this point after collecting information from 24 individuals in expert interviews and from 11 individuals through participant observation. The combination of literature reviews, expert interviews, and participant observations used in this study serves for cross-validation between statements published, statements made by experts, and the everyday practices of researchers. The following pages present the findings, combining the information gained from the literature review, the expert interviews, and the participant observations.

The trend towards a commercialization of university research

Lately, universities around the globe have shifted closer to the market (Burawoy 2011, 2013; Brown 2011; Popp Berman 2015). This shift indicates a change in the character of universities. It leads universities away from the Humboldtian model of higher education, which posits that students receive a well-rounded education that allows them to participate in society as autonomous citizens, and that teaching is entwined with research and detached from economic influences (Agasisti and Catalano 2006; Humboldt et al. 1964). Instead, universities are turning their attention towards the market, where degrees derive their value from the work prospects they offer, and research aims to generate revenues (Campaign for Social Sciences 2015; Esko et al. 2012). Some researchers argue that the shift in universities is a direct result of neoliberalism gaining ground (Richter and Hostettler 2015). Others describe it as a necessary reaction of universities to dwindling resources: where governments cut their funding for universities and national and international research funding likewise decreases, universities have to tap new funding sources. Under these circumstances, turning to the market is a necessity (Tuunainen and Knuuttila 2009). Several authors state that by now, universities have a third mission in addition to research and teaching (Gulbrandsen and Slipersaeter 2007; Montesinos et al. 2008). This third mission sees universities leaving their figurative ivory tower to transfer the knowledge they hold to society (Etzkowitz et al. 2000). For example, the University of Vienna, Austria, carries out this mission by developing support measures for youths with caring responsibilities, supervising a cooperation between tax authorities and companies, and developing polymers that are suitable for harsh environments (University of Vienna, 2017). Research commercialization is one approach to carrying out the third mission, explicitly focusing on market impact.

Market elements are incorporated into universities in different ways. Universities integrate them into either teaching or research. They do this by either strengthening market mechanisms such as competitions and payments for services, or by involving market actors such as companies (Higher Education Council for England 2014; Holmwood 2007, 2010; Marginson 2006; Reay 2011). Table 1 uses the separation of university activities into teaching and research and the separation of market aspects into market mechanism and market actors to define a two-by-two matrix. The matrix differentiates a total of four approaches to integrating market aspects into universities.

[Table 1 about here]

The first approach is to integrate market mechanisms into teaching. This approach entails that tuition fees are charged or increased, because the knowledge obtained while studying is sold as a private good which generates advantages in the labour market (Burawoy 2011; Holmwood 2011). Such fees are common in, for example, the Netherlands and Eastern European countries (Brown 2011). This approach also entails that funding for teaching is allocated on a competitive basis. For example, from 2006 on Germany universities competed for funding from the ‘Excellence Initiative’ to set up graduate school programs (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft 2013). The second approach is to integrate market mechanisms into research. The competition for funding from research agencies has long been established, and most researchers are all too familiar with it. The British 2014 Research Excellence Framework took this competition to a new level when it evaluated university research using indicators for social and economic impact, among other things. The rankings obtained in the evaluation are used to guide funding decisions and to decide on strategies for funding agencies (Higher Education Council for England 2014; King’s College London and Digital Science 2015). The third approach is to involve market actors in teaching. In many countries it is common practice for students to intern with companies, for some students to write their

theses in cooperation with companies, and for companies to sponsor universities, which some universities acknowledge by dedicating lecture halls to their sponsors. A recent trend is the establishment of corporate universities, which are institutes for workplace-related education run by companies (Blass 2001, 2005). Even though these corporate universities are still mainly concentrated in the United States and do not yet have degree-awarding powers, they may develop into alternatives to European public universities in the years to come. The fourth approach is to involve market actors in research, which means to commercialize university research. This practice is common especially in the sciences, technology, and engineering, as reports from, for example, Finland, Italy, Ireland, Norway and Sweden demonstrate (Rasmussen et al. 2006; Scognamiglio et al. 2010). Lately, however, other disciplines have also started to adopt this practice.

Among the approaches to introducing market elements into the university, research commercialization holds a special position. It is the only approach where universities go beyond their missions of teaching and research to pursue a third mission of market impact (Gulbrandsen and Slipersaeter 2007). To achieve research commercialization, universities have several options. They can patent inventions and then sell or license the patents to companies. Alternatively, they can cooperate with commercialization support service to create spin-off companies exploiting research results. Finally, they can conduct commissioned research, which extant companies use for commercial purposes (Korenman 1993; Moriarity 2011; Rasmussen 2008; Zhao 2004). All of these options for research commercialization would create either one-time pay offs or constant revenue streams for universities (Marginson 2006; Rasmussen 2008).

The unique situation of sociological research

While all scientific disciplines need to accommodate the increasing market orientation of universities, the discipline of sociology faces some unique challenges. As part of the social sciences, it has, until now, usually not engaged in research commercialization. However, the social sciences differ considerably in their market orientation. The social science discipline closest to the market is economics, which produces research that directly benefits companies, products, and the labour market (Campaign for Social Sciences 2015; Esko et al. 2012). The social science discipline furthest away from the market is sociology (Burawoy 2005).

In his widely acknowledged presidential speech at the 2004 conference of the American Sociological Association, Michael Burawoy emphasized the unique character of sociology (Burawoy 2005). He explained that sociology differs from other social sciences in that it focusses on civil society. As one of its central tasks, sociology adopts the perspective of civil society and defends it against the interests of the state and the market. To do this, sociology developed a range of specializations. One specializations is that of a public sociology, which creates a discourse on and within society. Another specialization is that of a critical sociology, which causes sociology to reflect on and question its own ideas and assumptions. Burawoy's explanations suggest that sociology did not keep its distance to the market and hold back on research commercialization because of an oversight, but because these actions are part of its disciplinary character. In other words, if sociology were to commercialize its research, it may jeopardize its disciplinary identity. While sociologists debate Burawoy's statements and stress that they fit some sociologists better than others, there is a general consensus that he captured the current spirit of sociology (Aronowitz 2005; Calhoun 2005; Davies 2009; Ghamari-Tabrizi 2005; Holmwood 2007).

The disciplinary character of sociology shapes its approach to the third mission of universities. With their focus on society and the social fabric, sociologists gravitate towards studies of social problems, such as the current refugee crisis or the shift towards right-wing

voting (Lianos 2015; Sheikhzadegan and Nollert 2017). The corresponding outreach activities strive for societal impact, helping to overcome societal challenges. Sociologists do not disqualify market impact from their considerations, but rather assigns it a low priority when pursuing the third mission.

How to commercialize sociological research

A commercialization of sociological research may be challenging, but it is doable. This study identified several projects where such a step has already been taken and other projects where it would have been possible. Drawing on these examples, one can identify three strategies to commercialize sociological research (see Table 2).

[Table 2 about here]

A first strategy is to design research projects that study companies or institutions. In this case, the company or institution studied would have a vested interest in the study result and, therefore, be willing to cooperate and pay for the research. An example is a Swedish project where a sociologist cooperated that planned to introduce a programme for older workers. The sociologist was supposed to observe the introduction and evaluate the outcome of the programme. Another example is a group of theologists who cooperated with companies to develop a training programme that increases the employees' social skills, thereby improving the companies' performances. The theologists developed the training programme and administered it to the employees. While the latter project was not carried out by sociologists, it nevertheless has sociological components and could also be carried out by sociologists. The second strategy is to design research projects that study products or services, either inventing or improving them in the process. An example is a German research institute where sociologists regularly develop teaching materials from their findings. The materials for classroom teaching and e-learning are offered for sale. Another example is a

social psychologist who worked on a health care app project. The app had already existed before the project started, but suffered from poor user acceptance. The project was to determine why the user acceptance had been low, and how it could be increased. This project was only at the border of sociology, because social psychology is located in between sociology and psychology, but it nevertheless demonstrates how sociologists could contribute to product development. The third strategy is to design multidisciplinary research projects with multiple goals. In these projects, sociology is only one of the disciplines involved, and research commercialization is only one of the goals set. As a result, the sociologists' contribution to research commercialization varies between projects, ranging from direct to very indirect contributions. Such project configurations can typically be found in the European Commission's Horizon2020 projects. One of the interviewees participated in such a project on the activities of healthy older people. Within the project, a technology development institute and a business development institute organized an international series of consumer tests of new technological products for older people. The sociologists mainly worked in other parts of the project, and their contribution to the commercialization was through knowledge transfer via the project deliverables and within project meetings. As a result, their contribution to a research commercialization within this specific project was of a more indirect nature.

The advantages of a commercialization of sociological research

The commercialization of sociological research is promoted because it can have advantages. Interestingly, it was generally interviewees who were not sociological researchers that identified such advantages. The biggest advantage identified is that commercialization provides funding for sociological research. Two economists and a member of a university's funding support team stressed this aspect when talking about the financial situation in

academia. As such, the advantage is not specific to sociological research. Instead, it should be seen as part of a general goal to increase research funding through commercialization, as for example the University of Helsinki (2016), Finland, describes it in its strategy for 2017–2020. A second advantage is that a commercialization of sociological research can improve products. Two interviewees pointed out that sociologists are well-suited for testing the consumer acceptance of new technologies. The test results can then be used to improve these products. The interviewees who mentioned this advantage were a member of a university's research funding support and a consultant to the United Nations and the European Commission. The consultant additionally identified a third advantage, which they see in the increased information flow between sociological research and technological research. According to them, such information flow creates new knowledge, which has a value as a public good. A fourth and final advantage is that the commercialization of sociological research can create new career possibilities for sociologists. An Italian postdoctoral sociologist described how recent developments such as budget cuts and an increased pressure to publish worsened the working atmosphere in academia. This researcher considered leaving academia in reaction to the changes, aiming to start a career in a different sector. They were hoping that a commercialization of their research would result in the creation of a company, which would create a job opportunity for them and, thereby, pave their way out of academia.

The disadvantages of a commercialization of sociological research

Sociologists named a range of disadvantages of commercializing their research. Often the statements about disadvantages were made with strong pathos and conviction. Emotions arose because some of the disadvantages listed relate to the interviewees' identities, world views, and ethical beliefs. The other disadvantages concern the knowledge and skills needed

and the effects on academic careers. The advantages and disadvantages identified are summarized in Table 3.

[Table 3 about here]

The most commonly named disadvantage is that sociological research does not easily lend itself to a commercialization. Sociological researchers regularly cited this fact, often responding to questions about a possible commercialization of their research with statements like ‘This makes no sense!’ or ‘This is not what we do!’. Upon further inquiry, they explained that sociology concerns itself with human beings and society, exploring how people interact with each other and how societies work. Moreover, they pointed out that important research topics in sociology are social problems and vulnerable groups, such as social inequality, poverty or migrants. Most sociologists I interviewed struggled to identify any commercial potential of their research, with one interviewee illustrating the problem in the telling statement ‘What am I supposed to sell? Social inequalities?’. Interestingly, this assessment contradicts the other findings of this study. A consultant and a member of funding support services easily identified possibilities to commercialize sociological research, as reported in the section on the advantages of a commercialization. Moreover, I found several examples where a commercialization of sociological research already takes place. Therefore, the sociologists’ assessment should not be regarded as a universally valid diagnosis of the sociological research field. Instead, it seems tinted by the way some sociologists see themselves, making it a matter of identity and self-concept. As such, this argument is in line with Burawoy’s (2005) assessment of the character of sociology.

A second disadvantage is that a commercialization of sociological research raises ethical concerns. Several interviewees shared this concern, citing two different reasons. Most sociologists were worried that commercializing their research would increase social inequalities and social exclusion. They found such an effect problematic, because social

inequalities and social exclusion were not only their research topics, but also phenomena they tried to combat. In many sociologists' experiences, market mechanisms create social problems, which they as sociologists try to solve through strategies that are outside the market. For them, a commercialization of sociological research means not only a change in the research's focus, but also a betrayal of the mission they see in their own research. A researcher who developed software for health care described the change in perspective as follows: 'I used to do research into social inequalities in health, now I do research that increases social inequalities in health'. A social scientist voiced a second kind of concern during a discussion of a sociological grant proposal, which would render findings that could be used to develop commercially viable software. This social scientist demanded that the mentioning of possible product development be removed from the proposal, because product development as such would be ethically unacceptable. With this comment, they echoed Humboldt's view that universities and the economy should be separated (Humboldt et al. 1964). Thus, this comment can be seen as criticism of the recent neoliberal turn of universities.

The third and fourth disadvantages are closely entwined with the arguments just presented. The third disadvantage is that research commercialization may endanger the scientific discipline of sociology. Sociology is a discipline that stresses subjectivity and the lack of one universal truth, as a British sociology professor argued, drawing on the works of Burawoy (2013) and Pilnick (2013). As a result, sociology will always be dominated and stunted when cooperating with disciplines that assume the existence of one universal truth. In a commercialization of sociological research, such domination occurs because an economic logic is imposed. Considering the previous findings of this study, we can add that a commercialization may also stunt the mission to improve social conditions that many sociologists see as part of their work. The fourth disadvantage is that a commercialization

may reduce the status of sociological knowledge as a public good. The interviewees came to this conclusion for three reasons: with a commercialization they would reach only some individuals, whereas they are currently trying to reach the entire society; they might increase social problems, whereas they are currently trying to solve social problems; they would do applied research, whereas currently they are doing basic research that strives to understand social dynamics.

The fifth and sixth disadvantages identified relate to practical questions. The fifth disadvantage is a lack of knowledge on research commercialization among sociologists. This lack extends to knowledge on which products could be developed, how product development works, and where information on product development can be obtained. An Austrian economist suggested that this lack of knowledge may not only impede the chances for sociological research commercialization, it may also be partly responsible for the sociologists' dismissive attitude towards research commercialization. The lack of access to information on product development is a bigger obstacle among sociologists than among scientists, because sociologists are excluded from some support structures that scientists can use. For example, an officer from an Irish research and innovation agency reported that this agency had neither a contact person nor a division for the social sciences, whereas they had a contact person and well-developed divisions for the sciences and technology. However, this agency would be willing to work with social scientists, because they set up a non-profit organization in their previous work and imagine that working with social scientists would be similar to that project. By comparison, a German research and innovation agency took a harsher stance. They reported that they had never worked with any social scientists, that they were not open to doing this, and that they did not even want to discuss possibilities for sociologists to commercialize their research. When I contacted them, they summarized their point of view in the pointed statement 'We don't do things like that.'

The sixth disadvantage is that sociologists who commercialize their research work outside the core of their expertise. The previous results showed that sociologists see their expertise in basic research on societies, in studies of social problems, and in findings solutions to social problems. When commercializing their research, sociologists would turn away from this expertise and instead compete with the Research and Development Departments of bigger companies. Companies usually do the research and product development they need in house, they have considerable resources for this purpose and experience in this area. Competing or cooperating with these companies could be a challenging task for sociologists. At an event on the future of universities, a Finnish sociology professor narrated how they had contacted a company and asked about possibilities for cooperation. The company turned this professor down with the explanation: 'If I want to know something, I can do it myself. And I can figure it out much faster and cheaper than you can. Don't try to do my job. Tell me how many angels fit on the head of a pin. That is what I want to know from you!'. The professor interpreted this anecdote as a reminder of the core expertise of sociologists, and as a sign that basic research can have an inspirational function, which some companies value.

The seventh and final disadvantage is that a commercialization may end the sociologists' academic careers. Researchers from all disciplines and countries agreed that a commercialization of research would take up a considerable part of their working time. Consequently, they would need to cut back on other activities, such as publishing in academic journals. Lower numbers of publications can slow down or even end academic careers, because of the ever closer link between publication rates and academic career progression. Of course researchers could try to publish manuscripts describing their commercialization activities. However, they may wish to hold back on such publications as not to impede any pending patents or disseminate confidential business information (Di Norcia 2005; Korenman

1993). During the interviews, a theologian who worked on a project with several banks and insurance institutes reported very delicate negotiations about which pieces of information could be included in published articles. The project needed the help of the university administration, including a lawyer, to determine how the cooperation could be arranged.

Discussion and conclusion

Recent budget cuts in academia and the expansion of neoliberal thought are exerting pressure on sociology. Sociologists need to unlock new sources of research funding, and current discussions are suggesting a turn towards the market. Such a turn could be achieved through research commercialization, meaning the development of products and services that can be sold at the market. However, such a commercialization is hotly contested because it clashes with the sociological self-understanding as proponents of civil society. This article contributes to the debate on the commercialization of sociological research by identifying ways to achieve commercialization and by highlighting the advantages and disadvantages.

The first research question is how a commercialization of sociological research can be achieved. Findings indicated that it can be implemented in several ways and that it is already being used in various projects: as sociological research on companies, as sociological research on products, and as sociological research within multidisciplinary projects with multiple goals. The implementation of the extant projects that commercialize sociological research was described as unproblematic. This assessment arose because these projects took on a mainly organizational perspective on the commercialization of sociological research, while putting ethical and moral questions aside.

The second research question is to determine the advantages of commercializing sociological research. Findings showed that these advantages lie in obtaining research funding, improving products, generating new knowledge, and giving sociologists who want

to leave academia a better chance to transition to the private sector. These advantages mainly centre on economic questions. Interestingly, they were put forth by economists, people who work in research administration, a consultant, and a sociologist who considered leaving academia. Thus, these advantages seem particularly evident to people who already concern themselves with economic and administrative questions. Consequently, it seems that the commercialization of sociological research will be judged more advantageous the further neoliberal thought spreads within universities.

The third research question is to determine what disadvantages a commercialization of sociological research has. The findings revealed a range of such disadvantages: the antithetical nature of sociology and research commercialization; the lack of economic knowledge among sociologists; ethical concerns about increasing social problems and losing academic freedom; a fear that the unique character of sociology would be lost; the perception that research commercialization detracts from public goods; and a possible end to academic careers. These disadvantages centre on the character of sociology, the social impact of research, and the logic of academic careers. Not surprisingly, most of the disadvantages were put forth by sociologists and other social scientists or derived from the sociologists' everyday work experiences. Therewith, it appears that the disadvantages are mainly an impairment of sociological academic research and a possible increase in social problems – with sociologists underlining the connection between both phenomena. This assessment is in line with Burawoy's argument that a turn towards the market contradicts the core mission of the sociological discipline.

The findings have theoretical and practical implications. Theoretical implications arise because commercializing sociological research may change the scientific discipline of sociology. If the commercialization progresses, then sociology will increasingly study companies and products. Such studies already exist, often under the label of economic

sociology. Thus, research commercialization will give economic sociology a more prominent position, influencing what phenomena sociologists collect information on. Simultaneously, research commercialization will let ethical considerations fade into the background of productivity considerations, and it will strengthen applied research at the expense of basic research. These shifts in the mode of research contrast with the goal of many sociologists to study pressing social problems and contribute to their solution in an ethically considerate and socially responsible way. Such a change is, of course, not the same as the closing down of entire sociology departments, which recently occurred at American and Japanese universities (Lill 2016). However, it does suggest a possible erosion from the inside and a repurposing of sociology. The European Sociological Association warns that this development would put sociology into a handmaiden role to other disciplines (European Sociological Association 2015; Leccardi 2013). Such an outcome of sociology's current transition process would be undesirable because it would stint sociology's unique contributions to society and the academic community, instead of allowing it to develop theoretically and methodologically to capture emerging social challenges within the framework of the new financial constraints.

Practical implications arise because the findings can help researchers, the university administration, and policymakers to better negotiate a further commercialization of sociological research. The findings highlighted the different perspectives applied on this topic, showing that between advantages and disadvantages runs a demarcation line of scientific disciplines and occupational groups. Moreover, the findings spell out what advantages and disadvantages a commercialization entails and who considers them. This insight can help all parties involved to realize what is at stake when a commercialization of sociological research is further pursued. It might even help to mobilize some researchers, university administrators, and policymakers who were not yet involved in the commercialization debate. Within the debate, the insight generated can help all parties

involved to better understand one another's positions, interests, and concerns, thereby facilitating a more reflective and constructive dialogue. Such a dialogue is necessary, because commercial and academic sociological research seem set to coexist within universities in the years to come. Sociologists, university administrations and policymakers need to find ways to make this coexistence viable, ensuring that academic careers in sociology can continue while university funding suffices and society benefits. Finally, the findings of this study list possibilities for how to commercialize sociological research, which researchers who decide to take this route can use as a blueprint.

Despite its merits, this study also has some limitations. First, it deals with the situation in sociology only. The focus on one discipline allows for an in-depth analysis and generates concise findings. However, the pressure to commercialize research exists for all disciplines, and the discourses and practices overlap to some degree. In this study, the overlap with other social sciences is particularly visible, in that administrators, consultants, and the private sector often treat the social sciences as one unit. Additionally, the overlap is visible in that the different disciplines of the social sciences sometimes have meetings together or attend one another's events. Consequently, it seems likely that some of the findings also hold true for other disciplines. Second, this study outlines the situation in sociology in Europe. The focus on Europe instead of a single European country was chosen because the policies of the European Commission in the educational sector, the exchange of ideas between European universities, and the researchers' high mobility within Europe interlink European universities. Therefore, developments in European higher education are discussed and reacted to across countries. Moreover, the study of several countries allows for identifying general arguments and dynamics, contributing to the conciseness of findings. However, the exact situation of sociology differs across countries, because of country-specific educational systems, societal structures, and theoretical orientations (Brown 2011). As a result, the relevance of each

advantage and disadvantage identified in this study will vary across countries. Further research is needed to outline country-specific priorities in the advantages and disadvantages of a commercialization of sociological research.

In summary, this study clearly highlights the implications of a commercialization of sociological research. While the commercialization may at first glance seem like a simple idea and a strategic move, it turns out to threaten the sociologists' disciplinary identity and ethical self-understanding. Because of these implications, discussions on the commercialization of sociological research can quickly take on an emotional character and turn into heated debates. A crucial factor is that sociologists see the easing of social problems as their mission, which is a sensitive issue that many administrators and consultants overlook. As a result, discussions about the commercialization of sociological research are marred by a lack of mutual understanding. To avoid further speaking at crossed purposes, any effort to commercialize sociological research should be accompanied by discussions on social implications and ethical aspects. Moreover, any commercialization of sociological research needs to proceed circumspectly, considering that it could internally erode the discipline of sociology.

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Table 1: Market aspects in universities

		Aspect of the university	
		Teaching	Research
Aspect of the market	Market mechanisms	tuition fees; competition for teaching funding	competition for research funding
	Market actors	internships; theses with companies; sponsoring; corporate university	research commercialization

Table 2: Strategies for commercializing sociological research

Strategy	Details
Research studies companies	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• projects that evaluate companies• projects that develop services for companies
Research studies products	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• projects that develop new products• projects that improve extant products
Multidisciplinary research projects with multiple goals	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• sociologists involved with commercialization to various degrees

Table 3: Advantages and disadvantages of commercializing sociological research

Area	Advantages	Disadvantages
Discipline of sociology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • receives research funding 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • sociology and commercialization are antithetical • skills missing • sociology may be eradicated
Contribution to the market	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • can improve products 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ethical concerns: social problems can increase with more market mechanisms
Public good	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • generates new knowledge as a public good 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • selective market contribution is no public good
Impact on career	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • sociologists can start careers in industry 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • can end academic careers because of lack of publications